

The power of the mind

Rasheeda Bhagat

Call it faith-healing, will power, bio-response or whatever. To a lay person, the dividing lines are thin when these mechanisms are used to combat disease. But in neurological parlance, each of these has a distinct definition. The well-known neurosurgeon Dr. B. Ramamurthi provides the neuro-scientist's perspective to these concepts in an interview to Business Line. Excerpts:

HEALTH SCAN

The New York Times recently carried an article about the power of the brain to combat diseases, and how placebos have worked when patients are told these were specific drugs. How does the brain react to placebos?

A placebo is something that pleases, though it is not supposed to be scientifically effective. In an experiment done about 15-20 years ago, 12 people with headache were given aspirin and another 12 were given sugar-coated pills. Of the first 12, 10 got relief from headache, and in the other group, 8 got relief.

More important, the endorphin (the chemical that counteracts pain) content of the blood increased, even in the people who got the sugar-coated pill. This meant that because they believed that they had had a pain-relieving drug, they produced their own pain-killing mechanism.

The brain has the inherent capacity to produce chemicals which counteract disease. But we have lost that capacity.

Why and how?

It has happened over years, and by our moving away from nature in the last 1000-2000 years. Animals still retain that capacity. Even today, the body produces endorphin in stress situations, as in a battlefield or a road accident.

When a road accident takes place and a man's arm is crushed, he won't feel the pain immediately, but only after 5, 10 or 15 minutes, when other things happen, because the accident has produced the chemical in the brain to control the pain.

Nature takes care of this. When an animal is injured and goes on thinking about the pain, how will it escape the enemy? So to enable it to escape from the danger, pain is temporarily suppressed. The same thing happens in a battlefield. The arm is blown off but the soldier complains of pain only after reaching the base.

Is this what is called bio-response?

No, that is different. This is the basic level of pain control. Our yogis say that by controlling the mind you can control pain. Because in the brain there are many levels, called gates.

The brain, by choice, can prevent many sensory inputs from reaching it. For instance, a mother is waiting for a train, sleeping at a busy railway station. She is asleep in the midst

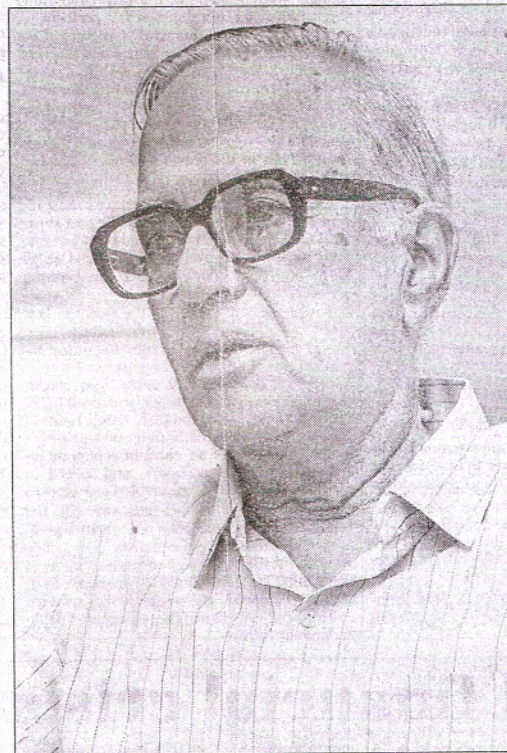
of an enormous level of noise, with a baby in her arms. The moment the baby moves a little she wakes up. Nothing else... not all the noise around... disturbs her.

Why?

Because the brain has told itself: Shut off all that; allow only this. This is called the gating mechanism of the brain. Yoga works by this gating mechanism. In the 1950s, Ramana Maharishi refused any pain-killer for the surgery of a tumour.

No anaesthesia?

No. He just shut off his body from his mind.



Dr. B. Ramamurthi: The most important thing is upgrading mental power by meditation.

He said: I have nothing to do with this organ. What is this? It is separate.

Even Gandhiji is supposed to have done the same.

Many people with sheer will-power are able to control pain. Ordinary emotions all of us can control, but pain is a very severe emotion. To control that requires a lot of practice and will-power.

How does this work in the cure/control of cancer?

We know cancer is produced by a failure in the protective mechanism in the body. All of us have police cells in the blood going around all the organs, and if they see any abnormal activity or cells, they kill those. They are called the killer cells of the immune system. The immune system works not only for allergies — hay fever or dust allergy or whatever — but also for cancer. But if the killer cells fail in their duty due to various reasons — depression or the stimulus for the cancer being very high, like smoking — then the cancer begins to grow. The present-day or the future therapy for cancer is going to be by improving the power of the killer cells by various mechanisms. Instead of attacking the tumour at the site *per se*, improve the defence and automatically it will get controlled. But this has been known in the past too... by increasing its own power, the mind can improve the policing mechanism and make it more powerful to control these tumours.

In many such cases, the defence mechanism breaks down when faith goes — either in the drug, the doctor or whatever.

That is why, in Sanskrit, it is said that the result of the amount of faith you have in your doctor, guru and your parents will be reflected in learning faster or making the disease go away faster.

If you keep questioning your doctors about the complications, it is treating a doctor like a mechanic. I'll give you the example of many patients who come to me from Calcutta,

who are on all kinds of costly medicines. I give them very simple drugs and most of them get cured immediately. It is not my medicine but their faith in a person which heals.

Like the shrine at Lourdes in France where people take the water and get cured. You can call it psychological but actually there is no psychology without the brain.

Isn't religious faith also associated with the brain?

Absolutely. Religious faith or fanaticism... What is fire-walking? You believe that the goddess Mariamma will not burn your foot. Now they have a new science called psycho-neuro-immunology.

Psycho means the mind... mind includes neuro — the brain. Mind and brain, according to me, are the same but there can be a discussion on it. Mind is a function of the brain. By changing the milieu inside the brain it has been proved that one can improve immune mechanisms and conquer disease.

It has been found that in elderly couples married for many years, if one person dies, the other usually dies within the next one year... almost 80 per cent. This is because the other partner has lost faith in life or, rather, in himself/herself. All immune mechanisms begin to fail and they get either a rapidly developing cancer or a heart attack, or some other disease, and are not able to come out of it.

This is psycho-neuro-immunology, and in animal experiments a lot of tracks have been traced from the brain along the spinal cord to the thymus which is the gland for the immune system, and then the adrenal gland. All these are activated by the brain and immune capacity increases.

In my last column I wrote about Mr. Murlu Menon's case, which you have read. Your response.

Murlu Menon was injured and had paralysis. There was no severe organic damage. If the arm is damaged, it will not grow back with faith. But if the damage is minimal, then the body, helped by the person's faith, can cure itself of certain disabilities.

In Murlu's case, the damage might have been a contusion... not a complete rupture or a haemorrhage, or something that damaged his function. It might have only interfered with the function. So, the moment he started the neuro-linguistic programme — the mechanism by which you improve the neural function — he got better. One can do the same thing with strokes.

The most important thing is upgrading mental power by meditation. Of course, the pharmaceutical industry and the doctors, if they think this is going to work, will downgrade this... there is no doubt about it.

Why should do they that?

How many cardiologists ask patients to go for yoga therapy? How many obstetricians teach their patients to do exercises after the birth of a baby? The allopathic medical profession has been brainwashed into a sort of negativism. Closing your eyes and saying "divine energy flows through me", like Murlu did, is the essence of the Gayatri mantra. One invokes the *savitri*, which, ordinarily speaking, is the sun. But it is the power inside the glorious sun that one invokes in one's mind and prays: Let it stimulate our brains. One does not ask for money or position!

(Response to this column can be sent to rasheeda@thehindu.co.in or faxed to 044-8535325.)